



Making Life Easier
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Long-distance Caregiving for Elders

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In the past 30 years, our society has changed dramatically. The days of extended families living in the same community are long gone. Family members often are spread from coast to coast.

Increasingly, adult children are stepping into the role of long-distance caregiver. They face considerable challenges, tending to the needs of their immediate families and their jobs, while having responsibilities for their elder relatives in other communities.

More than seven million people provide long-distance care to an older relative, according to a 1997 study by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) and The Pew Charitable Trust. The NCOA/Pew study described the average caregiver to be 46 years old, caring for a 78-year-old relative who lives approximately 304 miles away.

As difficult as caregiving at a distance can be, there are strategies you can use to bridge the gap.

Plan

It often is an emergency—a sudden hospitalization or the death of one parent—that triggers the need for adult children to assist older relatives. Making decisions in a crisis can be difficult. While making specific plans in advance may be unrealistic, family members can talk about possible scenarios and ease future decision making.

Explore your relatives' support network

Neighbors, doctors, relatives and clergy can be extremely helpful. They can be a contact for you should an emergency occur. They also can keep you posted about any changes in health or behavior. And, if assistance is needed, they are a resource for support.

Learn about community resources

There are excellent services in most communities including visiting nurses, home-delivered meals, senior centers and specialized transportation. You can find information in the local telephone book, at the town hall or library or in the local newspaper. Knowing about these services will enable you to act quickly once services are needed.

Explore resources your employer offers

Find out about any elder-care benefits your employer offers. Become familiar with the Family

Medical Leave Act. It allows eligible employees up to 12 work weeks of unpaid leave in the course of a 12-month period to care for an immediate family member with a serious condition.

Seek personal support

Join a local caregiver's support group or network informally with others who also live at a distance from their relatives. Many adult children experience a myriad of emotions when a parent ages, even when they live in the same community. Living at a distance can intensify them. Adult children often feel guilty that they have established their lives elsewhere. They also may feel helpless because they cannot be available in an emergency or to offer routine support.

Make regular visits to evaluate “firsthand”

Through the wonders of technology, you can minimize the gap between you and your elder. However, there is no substitute for a personal visit to find out if any changes are taking place in your relatives' ability to live independently. Often the changes can be subtle and—because they can be most apparent to those who are not in daily contact—your point of view can be very informative.

Like all life transitions, the aging of one's parents requires some changes and awareness. Advance thinking and planning can make the transition smoother and more manageable if you live in another community.

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